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Social policy of the local government unit as an initiator of good practices in activating the disabled

Abstract

The issues of people with disabilities analysed for the purpose of developmental strategies of towns and local government units constitute a motif hardly ever discussed in literature on special pedagogy. Yet, this subject cannot be recognized as insignificant – developmental strategies are important documents which initiate good practices in the field of many social activities. The study is aimed at presenting possible directions in acting for the disabled within the social policy (which is exemplified by the case of the Silesia Voivodeship) and signalling the potentialities of this policy as a tool for initiating, integrating and reconstructing good practices leading to normalization of this group's environment. What is presented in the article is basic information on particular strategies, possible contextual approaches to including the issues of the disabled in these strategies and a sample set of goals and undertakings for this group, extracted from the social policy of the Silesia Voivodeship for 2014–2020.

Keywords: a disabled person, social policy, good practice.

Polityka społeczna jednostek samorządu terytorialnego jako inicjatywa dobrych praktyk w aktywizacji osób z niepełnosprawnością

Abstrakt

Analiza problematyki osób z niepełnosprawnością ulokowanej w strategiach rozwoju miast i jednostek samorządu terytorialnego stanowi wątek pomijany w piśmiennictwie z zakresu peda-

gogiki specjalnej. Trudno jednak uznać go za nieistotny. Wszak strategię rozwoju stanowią ważne dokumenty inicjujące dobre praktyki w zakresie wielu działań społecznych. Celem opracowania jest ukazanie możliwych kierunków działań na rzecz osób z niepełnosprawnością w strategii polityki społecznej na przykładzie województwa śląskiego oraz zasygnalizowanie możliwości wykorzystywania strategii jako narzędzia inicjowania i integrowania, a także rekonstruowania dobrych praktyk na rzecz realizacji postulatów normalizacji środowiska życia tej grupy osób. W artykule zostały przedstawione podstawowe informacje na temat strategii, możliwych ujęć kontekstualnych lokowania w nich problematyki osób z niepełnosprawnością oraz przykładowy zestaw celów i działań na rzecz tej grupy osób, zaczerpnięty ze strategii polityki społecznej województwa śląskiego na lata 2014–2020.

Słowa kluczowe: osoba z niepełnosprawnością, strategia polityki społecznej, dobre praktyki.

Introduction

It seems obvious that last several decades should be recognized as a period of particularly intense social, cultural and economic transformations in the field of normalization (versus uniformation) of life environment of the disabled. However, the acting of some factors determining the change in the disabled's situation, either directly or indirectly, cannot be regarded as well-organized or coherent. It is a derivative of uncontrolled social, cultural and economic changes. This can be exemplified by an overall increase in unemployment, concentration of economic capitals, lowered financial resources for social support and the growing pace of everyday life. In practice, these are transformations which substantially hinder the situation of people who are less resourceful or educated and who have adjustment difficulties, including a large number of the disabled. Therefore, not only maintaining but also improvement of this group's quality of life require the consent of the ruling elites for consistent, long-term and multidimensional actions. This becomes particularly difficult due to frequent changes of the ruling authorities – both at the state and (maybe especially) at the local level. Thus, what becomes an important task is working out some mechanisms (aimed at long-term activity for the disabled) which would be resistant to political and economic changes. Social policies designed at the state and local level can constitute a tool for initiating and maintaining consistent implementation of tasks in the field of social, educational and therapeutic activities, irrespectively of changing governments and economic situations. Most frequently, these policies are a part of broader developmental strategies of towns, regions, local governments, institutions, firms or associations. It cannot be denied that they are sometimes imposed by legislation or the expectations of agencies which manage financial resources for supporting diversified activities. In such cases, the strategies get the postulative form and their significance is only apparent. However, an explicitly formulated strategy, concerning par-

ticular tasks and the related activities and possessing appropriate indices in the field of the expected effects, can be a useful tool for implementing organized, consistent and beneficial transformations of the daily life of people with disabilities.

In the past, the notion of strategy was associated mainly with the fields of military art or decision making in game theory, in compliance with the assumption that it comprises such ways of conduct which constitute a system of partial tactics (T. Pszczołowski 1978, p. 232). Currently, the issue of strategy is usually considered in management, where it is specified e.g. as a general programme of defining and 'implementing' an organization – a set of specifications what a particular organization intends to do. Thus, the strategy describes accurately the role of the organization and its place in the society, it defines the mission of the organization (the special reason of its existence, the feature which distinguishes it from others), it formulates the tasks to fulfil in order to reach the aims (Encyklopedia zarządzania, 2015). In the social context, strategy is a particular type of social acting of an individual or a group which constitutes an attempt to overcome the perceived oppositions or contradictions (M. Pacholski, A. Słaboń 2001, p. 192). As regards the activity of local government units, strategy comprises the definition of (repair and developmental) goals as well as provides a set of principles of conduct, prioritizing, deciding about the ways and tools for their implementation. In other words, strategy is a set of taxonomy of goals and instructions which constitute a tool kit useful in implementation of these goals. Therefore, strategy is a construct determining the priority in implementation of (developmental or repair) tasks – in practice, it occurs as a set of good practices.

The units of local government are obliged to various activities for people with disabilities. The range of their competences and tasks has been specified in legal acts, precisely indexed in some directives and appropriately assigned to particular levels of local government (more: e.g. B. Kołaczek, 2010). Depending on the applied procedure of constructing the strategy at particular levels, these tasks can be its in-built part or can be treated as less important or marginalized. Moreover, strategies can involve developmental or repair works which do not result directly from the tasks of local government units but are associated with non-formalized activities aimed at creating a positive image of the disabled, eliminating stereotypes concerning the perception of people with disabilities, building social capital which will enhance activeness of the discussed group and facilitate normalization of their environment. Hardly ever do local units construct separate strategies for activity in this field¹, more often – they

¹ For example: *Powiatowy program działań na rzecz osób niepełnosprawnych powiatu sztumskiego na lata 2012–2020* (<http://powiatszumski.pl/download/program20122020.pdf>, April 2015).

make the list of tasks a part of general strategies, most frequently of social policy².

What this study is aimed at is presenting possible directions of activities for people with disabilities in social policy by studying the case of the Silesia Voivodeship as well as signalling the potentialities of applying the strategy as a tool for initiating, integrating and reconstructing good practices heading for normalization of this group's environment.

The disabled in the strategies of local government units – a contextual approach

Even a rough analysis of sample developmental strategies of towns / municipalities or counties reveals that the situation of people with disabilities is not important³ for the designers of these documents. Most frequently, this subject matter is located in the field of social aid or health, less often also in education. The issue of disabled people often appears in the context of eliminating barriers and implementing the so called small projects in cooperation with or by some associations, foundations, religious organizations, etc. However in general, social policy – especially in the field of support – gives way to other important problems related to the development of infrastructure, strengthening the economic sector, environmental protection, education, tourism and sport. What seems an exception are the issues of health and prevention, which as a rule are of due significance in the whole range of general problems, constituting also a part of social policy. Incidentally, some issues concerning poverty, unemployment, providing social aid and ageing of the society are spotted.

Acting for integration and enhancing the activation of disabled people may apply various forms and may be situated in various fields. On the one hand, this seems natural – problems of this group, like of any other minority group, belong to many fields and relate to fulfilling different social roles. On

² As a rule, they have the form of solving problems strategies for a particular unit of local government for a specified period, e.g. *Strategia rozwiązywania problemów społecznych dla powiatu słupskiego na lata 2013–2020* (<http://www.powiat.slupsk.pl/plik,702,projekt-startegii.pdf>, April 2015); *Powiatowa strategia rozwiązywania problemów społecznych w powiecie grudziądzkim na lata 2014–2020* (<http://www.powiatgrudziadzki.pl/plik,4140,powiatowa-strategia-rozwiazywania-problemow-spolecznych-w-powiecie-grudziadzki-na-lata-2014-2020.pdf>, April 2015).

³ For example: The Developmental Strategy of Ustroń until 2020 comprises only one mention concerning the disabled. It was placed in the strategic goal No 4: Development of social capital and refers to innovative forms of activating the disabled. See: *Strategia Rozwoju Miasta Ustroń do roku 2020* (http://www.ustron.pl/fotki/2346/pliki/Strategia%20Rozwoju%20Miasta%20Ustro%F1%20do%202020%20roku_INTERNET.pdf, s. 47, April 2015).

the other hand, the dispersion of these problems hinders coordinated actions, enhances marginalization in the multitude of highlighted issues and dilutes their essence.

Fields of activity for the disabled in social policy of the local government unit the case of the Silesia Voivodeship

Strategia Polityki Społecznej Województwa Śląskiego na lata 2006–2020 / Social Policy of the Silesia Voivodeship for 2006–2020 (2006) with its updated version: *Strategia Polityki Społecznej Województwa Śląskiego na lata 2014–2020 / Social Policy of the Silesia Voivodeship for 2006–2020* (2014) is an example of a document in which the quality of life and enhancement of activation of the disabled are emphasized. Therefore, it is worth deeper studying.

Among the strategic goals, the third was specified as ‘Enhancing social participation of the disabled’ (*Strategia Polityki Społecznej Województwa Śląskiego na lata 2014–2010*, p. 276). There are five directions distinguished within this goal which will be referred to in the further part in the order suggested in the draft version of the document.

The first direction: Shaping pro-social attitudes facilitating the creation of the environment friendly to the disabled. This subject matter is compliant with the social model of disability, which is widely recognized as significant (T. Żółkowska 2004). A person with disability is a member of the local community, applies different roles there and interacts with other people. The situation of a disabled person depends on social attitudes but they do not always facilitate activation and full participation of the disabled in everyday life. It is important to undertake unceasing initiatives for improving the image of this group, eliminating the stereotypes concerning their perception and for providing real information about them. Such activities cannot be overrated – they constitute the starting point in creating the social capital which fosters normalization in life of people with disabilities.

In this field of activities, several sets of initiatives can be distinguished. Obviously, it is hard to separate them clearly from one another as they aim at this same goal – shaping socially desired attitudes to the disabled. However, it seems useful to distinguish within this field some typical detailed objectives. They can be derived from the triple concept of attitude, which is based on three components: the cognitive, emotional and behavioural one. The first (cognitive) element comprises the knowledge of the object of the attitude. The second (emotional) element consists of feelings related to this object. The third (behavioural) component is associated with the behaviour towards the object of the attitude (A. Ceranek-Dadas, E. Neuman-Schmidke 2005, pp. 745–749).

The first group of initiatives (aimed at creating the cognitive component) comprises reliable information campaigns on the needs and potentialities of the disabled. This means providing various information, based on scientific or common knowledge, presenting the daily life of people burdened with limitations. This information shows both the limitations (difficulties in fulfilling some typical social roles) and potentialities of these people. This is also the knowledge of disability itself, its types, degrees, aetiology, developmental possibilities and restrictions and the implementation of tasks indicated in social relations. This knowledge can have the form of charge-free printed guides, reports, radio or TV programmes, social network posts, as well as academic papers, film shows, etc. presented during various meetings (e.g. of the third age university, organizations, associations, at open events).

The second group of initiatives, associated with shaping the emotional component of the attitude, is based on creating positive emotions towards people with disabilities. This group comprises the elimination of stereotypes and prejudice, which makes it naturally related to the cognitive component. What becomes the most important in this range of activities is presenting the image of the disabled person as someone active, entering symmetrical relations with others, open to new experiences, willing to cooperate. In practice, this takes the form of the following undertakings: the Day of the Disabled's Dignity, the day of particular institutions acting for the disabled, the Neighbour's Day, picnics, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, etc. Disabled people play the key role in such events. It is important to present the disabled through the effects of the activities undertaken by them – the products, activeness and significance of their presence in/for the local environment. This set of initiatives may also involve organizing anti-discrimination trainings for university and school students as well as for other groups.

The third group of initiatives is oriented towards the behavioural component of the attitude. Most of all, this concerns creating possibilities of real acting for people with disabilities. The most important task in this field is strengthening voluntary service and organizing internships for university and school students in institutions working for the disabled.

The indicated activities should be introduced into programmes of local government units and non-government organizations as well as of school superintendents and universities, particularly those which educate social support staff and teachers.

The second direction: Enhancing the disabled's access to education. This subject matter is compliant with implementing the goals associated with increasing the quality of education of disabled learners in different forms (inclusive, integrated, individual, separative) and, as a consequence, with more effective preparation of the disabled for activeness and more complete integration. Two issues are worth mentioning on the margin of the discussed tasks:

- a very low higher education rate among people with certified disability – 6.7%, which is three times smaller than the rate of the whole population – 20.1% (quoted in: A. Żebrak, p. 99);
- structural transformations of the educational system aimed at enhancing equal access to different forms of special education with emphasis on inclusive education.

In the colloquial and political discourse, acting for better access to education of learners with certified need of special education is practically narrowed only to transformations of the educational system heading for strengthening inclusive activities. This might result in the rise of some mechanisms destroying the pluralistic dimension of special education in Poland and, in turn, may lead to misguided closing down of some positively evaluated institutions of special education. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of possibly the largest number of disabled learners into the open system of education is desired – however, this should be appropriately prepared by adjusting the mainstream school to implementing both educational and therapeutic tasks aimed at fulfilling special educational needs of learners who demand specialist approach and support. Therefore, the activities should be conducted in many dimensions. The first type of actions concerns maintaining the network of special education institutions. This task is associated with the first detailed objective: Elaborating an optimal network of special education (also integrated) institutions as a tool for identifying neglected areas in particular counties and municipalities and as an argument against irrational attempts to close down (or merge) special education schools. Another range of activities consists mostly in supporting widely accessible (mainstream) schools. One of such initiatives on the county level is creating specialist equipment rentals, which aims at improving the quality of the disabled's education during their education in mainstream school. In practice, this will eliminate the problem of costly purchases in the case of disabled learners who are educated in a mainstream school for a short time and then change for another school, following their parents' decisions. The objectives also comprise activities which promote the idea of educational assistance (with concrete tasks of organizing internships for educational assistants), IT and technical support in gaining resources from structural funds for developing the infrastructure, eliminating barriers and raising teachers' competences.

These activities depend on the cooperation of the Voivodeship Marshall Office, the Voivodeship Government, the Voivodeship Board of Education and local government units.

The third direction: Enhancing the disabled's access to information. The statement that information is widely accessible today is a truism as well as saying that the current times are a period of exorbitant information chaos. Beyond any doubt, there are many internet portals and other sources of knowledge aimed at informing the disabled about their rights and possibilities

of multidimensional support and activation. What becomes a problem is that this multitude, frequent lack of updated information and its dispersion do not facilitate its rational use by this group of people, who do not always function independently in the society. This is reflected in a strategic goal in this field – creating a widely accessible (regularly updated) voivodeship database, which will integrate the information from many narrow-range databases for the disabled. This base was included into the obligations and into the budget of the Voivodeship Government along with hypothetical support from EU funds. Obviously, the rise of such a database will not solve all the problems concerning insufficient information for the disabled – it will be important to conduct activities promoting its popularization and data updating. What constitutes another detailed objective within the direction towards better access to information for the disabled is conducting regular studies on problems, needs and expectations of people with disabilities in particular counties and municipalities as well as sharing the research data, also in the database discussed earlier. It seems that this knowledge and the focus on it will encourage local governments to undertake activities important for disabled inhabitants. Anyhow, local authorities will not be able to explain the cases of their negligence or abandonment with the argument of no knowledge of the needs and expectations of the disabled.

The fourth direction: Improving employment and enhancing socio-professional activation of the disabled. The significance of work in human life cannot be overrated. As regards people with limited abilities, work also fulfils rehabilitation functions. Their significance and multi-sidedness is emphasized almost by all authors of course books on rehabilitation (e.g. R. Ossowski 1999; S. Kowalik 2007). However, the employment rate of the discussed group in the production age is still unsatisfactory. According to the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), in 2012 the rate reached only 21.4 (quoted in: *Raport końcowy...*, 2015, p. 10). Unfortunately, the data indicate a stable tendency over several last years. Thus, it is hard to overestimate different actions undertaken on the state level for increasing the employment of the disabled. The indicated direction in the discussed policy is the complementation and enhancement of these actions. What becomes a goal of regional policy within improving the employment and professional activation of the disabled is fulfilling the activities which enhance development of the open work market – friendly to this group and involving their employment in local government units, social economy entities and other economic entities (*Strategia Polityki Społecznej...*, 2014, p. 280).

A detailed objective is to encourage local governments, their authorities and social economy entities to organize internship posts and practices for people with disabilities. Moreover, what seems of due significance is organizing trainings and promotion campaigns (which is strictly related to the

first direction) for employers which will provide information on employment principles concerning the disabled and their real potentialities as workers. It is also important to implement regional policy of supporting social economy entities, including social cooperatives and professional activeness plants. These tasks should be implemented mostly by local governments, non-government organizations, the voivodeship government and with the significant help of the National Fund for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (PFRON).

The fifth direction: Integrating and initiating activities of various entities for support enhancement and social participation of the disabled. In the Silesia Voivodeship, there are many forms of organizing care, support and professional activation for the disabled. Among them, the potentialities and activities of organizations belonging to sector III are of key significance. They raise grassroots initiatives, associate people with disabilities, specialize in aid and support, take over some public tasks of municipalities and counties, suggest and implement new solutions, making use of outsourced financing (e.g. EU funds) – they are the closest to the local community and target groups (*Strategia Polityki Społecznej...*, 2014, p. 281). In spite of some differences, their statute goals, interest fields and platforms of activity have common areas. Therefore, it is of key significance to create the tools for communication between them and the database concerning their aims, activities and achievements. Therefore, what has become the first detailed objective is creating the regional standard of coordinating the activities for the disabled at the level of a municipality, county or voivodeship in order to exchange information and improve cooperation between institutions. Other objectives concern including the disabled into revitalization projects in the EU financial plans for 2014–2020, implementing the “Charter of a Disabled Person” (which entitles to reductions in culture institutions and sport facilities run by the voivodeship) and promoting the engagement of local government units in the action “Charter of a Disabled Person”.

These are just some exemplary suggestions drawn from a wider range. The responsibility for their implementation is shared by the Plenipotentiary for the Disabled at the Silesia Voivodeship Marshall, local government units and the National Fund for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (PFRON).

Ending

The discussed cases are merely an illustration of possible aims and activities specified in the strategies of social policy of local government units (here of the Silesia Voivodeship). However, to make them something more than written statements aimed at cherishing appearances, three issues should be kept in mind.

Firstly, such a strategy is just a complementation of obvious activities imposed on the state, voivodeship, county or municipality. It does not substitute them. Therefore, the strategy comprises mostly suggestions for soft activities associated with creating an image, promoting particular actions, initiating, monitoring, diagnosing, integrating, etc. It does not constitute a legal document in the form of an act or a directive which would unambiguously impose particular activities on local governments.

Secondly, the strategy must comprise suggestions compliant with the area of possible activity of the local government unit which it concerns. Thus, it cannot comprise suggestions going beyond the (legal, economic) competences of the state.

Thirdly, the strategy should not only contain suggested activities with the organs responsible for their implementation but also point out the financial sources and, what seems most important, particular indicators for monitoring and the sources of information about them. Depending on the task, this might be: the number of precisely specified promotion campaigns, the number of conducted trainings for employers in the territory of a particular local government unit, the number of equipment rentals from the base of didactic aids, the number of website entrances to the database, etc.

Obviously, the actual applicability of the strategy in initiating good practices aimed at better quality of life for the disabled, their support and activation, depends mostly on reliability and commitment of people who perform these activities – and this is hardly measurable.

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